

Second Impression

BRISTOL  
AND THE SLAVE TRADE

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ISSUED BY THE BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION  
THE UNIVERSITY, BRISTOL

Price Three Shillings

1968

BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION  
LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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*Bristol and the Slave Trade* was first issued in 1963 and was the seventh in a series of pamphlets published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. It has been out of print for some time and it is now made available again in this second impression produced by photographic process.

The Branch wishes to express its thanks to the Gane Trust for making a grant to assist with the cost of production. Bristol City Library and the Bristol Archives Office kindly gave permission to photograph documents in their custody, and the photographs were taken by Mr. A. R. Griffin. The illustration of shackles was supplied by the Bristol City Museum.

Nineteen pamphlets have now been issued, and a full list of these publications will be found on the inside back cover. The twentieth pamphlet, which will appear in the spring of 1968, will be Professor Peter Marshall's *The Anti Slave Trade Movement in Bristol*, and this will be followed by Professor David Quinn's study of Sebastian Cabot. Other pamphlets are in course of preparation.

The pamphlets can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers or direct from Mr. Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Lane, Stoke Bishop, Bristol 9. It would be of great help if as many people as possible would place standing orders for future productions.

## BRISTOL AND THE SLAVE TRADE

by C. M. MACINNES

About the beginning of May 1552 Captain Thomas Wyndham of Marshfield Park in Somerset began a voyage to Barbary. On this occasion he sailed from Kingroad, near Bristol, in command of three ships whose cargoes consisted of a "good quantity of linen and woollen cloth, coral, amber, jet and divers other things well accepted by the Moors". So began the long association of the port of Bristol with the African trade, though it is possible that some previous Bristol ships had touched on the Barbary coast. During the later years of the sixteenth century, however, Bristol appears to have taken little interest in the African trade and successive African companies of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were London concerns. There is some evidence, however, that by the 1630s there was a growing spirit of resentment in Bristol against the privileges enjoyed by the metropolis. By that time, indeed, if not earlier, it seems probable, though there is nothing more than conjecture to proceed upon, that Bristol ships occasionally sailed for the Guinea coast to trade in gold, ivory and forest products.

It was the proud boast of Englishmen in the opening decades of the seventeenth century that, whatever other nations might think or do, they abhorred the trade in human flesh. Yet within a few years of the foundation of English colonies in the New World slaves were imported and by the time of the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 a revolution in public opinion on this subject had already taken place. The large plantations in Virginia and the West Indian colonies that were by then replacing the small farms of the first settlers required an abundant supply of cheap labour. The great numbers of political, sectarian and other offenders that were transported to the plantations, however, could not meet this need. Men, women and children were therefore kidnapped in the seaport towns and spirited away into bondage. This was a trade in which Bristol had a particularly sinister reputation. Thus when Judge Jeffreys visited Bristol in 1685

*... . . . he found all the aldermen and justices concerned in this kidnapping trade, more or less, and the mayor himself as bad as any. He thereupon turns to the mayor, accoutred with his scarlet and furs, and gave him all the ill names that scolding eloquence could supply; and so with rating and staring, as his way was, never left till he made him quit the bench and go down to the criminal's post at the bar; there he pleaded for himself, as a common rogue or thief must have done; and when the mayor hesitated a little or slackened*

*his pace, he bawled at him and stamping called for his guards . . .*<sup>1</sup>

In addition there were large numbers of voluntary emigrants who went as indentured servants. They were given a free passage to the plantations and an undertaking that they would be given land at the end of their term of service<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, supply still lagged far behind demand. Moreover, even if there had been enough of these voluntary and involuntary emigrants to meet the need, it was coming to be realised that such people were not suited to heavy plantation labour. The mortality among them was appalling. The planters, therefore, turned their attention to Africa, and England threw herself with zest into the trade in negroes.

Though well aware of the King's wish that the chartered Company should monopolise this traffic, Bristol was determined to have her share and so, while she petitioned Parliament to throw the trade open, it seems fairly evident from indirect references that increasing numbers of her ships resorted to the African coast. That this trade was important to the outports would appear to be shown as early as 1667. In that year, Sir Paul Painter, Ferdinando Gorges and other gentlemen and merchants in a petition to the House of Commons on behalf of themselves and of others concerned in the plantation trade declared that, thanks to the labour of negroes, the trade with the colonies had become one of the most important branches of the nation's commerce. They asserted that it had always been free—which was not strictly true. It was further implied that the importation of slaves from Africa had been open, and certainly during the period of the Civil Wars and the Commonwealth the Dutch had landed cargoes of slaves in the English plantations. In consequence of this freedom, the petitioners argued, the English plantations had been plentifully supplied with slaves at low rates. The recently erected company trading into Africa had obstructed English ships and as it had undertaken to supply large numbers of Africans to the Spanish colonies the English planters were now neglected. Unless some remedy was speedily found they would be destroyed through lack of labour.

The arguments used by the petitioners against the continuance of the Company's monopoly would appear to suggest that by then Bristol, the leading outport, laid great store by the African trade, in the conduct of which apparently her merchants were already well-versed. Indeed, it can be surmised that from 1660 to 1750 and later an intermittent struggle for the African trade went on between

1. Jessop, A. (ed. by), *The Lives of the Norths*, vol. 1. p. 285.

2. See A. E. Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, University of North Carolina, 1947. The names of some 10,000 emigrants who sailed from Bristol are recorded in two large volumes in the Bristol Archives Office.

London and the outports. The former stood for controlled commerce which it wished to monopolise while the latter demanded that the trade should be open. Each side adduced masses of alleged facts in support of its case but, while this wordy struggle continued and the London Company's monopoly still stood, it seems that Bristol, in defiance of both Company and King, went on expanding her illegal traffic. Certainly great store was laid by it before the end of the seventeenth century. During the reign of William and Mary the Royal African Company, like the East India Company, became very unpopular outside of London. It had enjoyed the special patronage of Charles II and James II, and the lucrative possibilities of the slave trade were now well understood.

John Cary, a citizen of Bristol and a noted economic writer of the time, in 1695 testified to the value of the African trade which he declared is:

*"a Trade of the most Advantage to this kingdom of any we drive, and as it were all Profit."*

the traffic in negroes

*"being indeed the best Traffick the Kingdom hath, as it doth occasionally give so vast an Imployment to our People both by Sea and Land."<sup>1</sup>*

In 1696 Bristol joined in the fray with a petition to the House of Commons against the continuance of the Company's monopoly. This was supported shortly afterwards by another petition from the clothiers and weavers of the city to the same effect. At length, in 1698,<sup>2</sup> the position of the private traders was legalised by a modification of the Company's monopoly. The African trade was thrown open to all who paid 10% on all goods imported into and exported from Africa, except redwood which paid 5%, gold, silver and negroes which were free. This Act also required the Company to continue to bear the cost of the maintenance of the forts on the West Coast.

In spite of the concessions which it made to them, this measure was as much detested by Bristol and other outports as by London, which during the next half century repeatedly attempted to have it repealed. In 1707/8, for example, the Merchant Venturers of Bristol heard with dismay that the Company was seeking to have its former monopoly restored. A petition from the merchants of the city "trading to Africa, the West Indies and all other Her Majesty's plantations in America" was therefore forwarded to Parliament against a design which if carried into effect would cripple

1. Cary, J. *An Essay on the State of England, in relation to its Trade, its Poor and its Taxes, for carrying on the present war against France.* pp. 74-75.

2. 9 & 10 William III. c. 26.

the trade of the city. In the following year (February 2nd, 1708/9) another petition from the Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol was presented to Parliament. Since the trade was thrown open, this document states, it had much increased and the plantations were better supplied with negroes than when the Company had it only, though, the petitioners went on to say, the present Act was far from satisfactory. The 10% export and import duties were unjust as the Company denied its protection to the private traders, and its agents on the coast discouraged the local inhabitants from trading with them. The petitioners therefore prayed that the trade of Africa would be put under such regulations that all the subjects of Her Majesty might be equal sharers therein.

As in the following year Bristol paid £1,577 5s. 0½d. in duties to the Company, its declared trade to Africa would appear to be still considerable and there is, of course, no record of the value of cargoes carried to the African coast by Bristol ships unknown to the Company. So the battle raged. In one broadsheet the Company's champions proved by statistics, carefully selected of course, that it alone had preserved and developed this important trade and that the free traders would ruin it if permitted to encroach upon it as they then did. They were guilty of grossly erroneous computations about the volume of their exports and the numbers of negroes carried by them to the plantations. To this the free traders retorted that since it was thrown open the trade had more than doubled. This was proved, they asserted, by the official returns made by the colonial governments to the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations. The Company, however, believed in carrying the war into the enemy's country. So in February 1712/13 a letter was sent by it to the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council of Bristol asking them to support its attempt to have the trade regulated and its former monopoly restored. No record remains of the manner in which this astonishing letter was received, but unless the character of Bristolians has altered radically since then the scene must have been a lively one.

Undaunted by its failures during the reign of Queen Anne, the Company returned to the attack on various occasions after that, but Bristol was always ready for these assaults. Thus, during the twenties, it spent considerable sums in defeating the Company's schemes. Again, in the forties, the fight was on once more. In 1744 the Board of Trade and Plantations was in communication with the Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers on this subject. In March of the following year, in a letter to one of the city's representatives in Parliament, the Society declared that the proposed engraftment of Bristol and other outport traders into the Company would be

injurious. It went on to say that it had no advice to offer the Government about what should be done if the Company declined to maintain the African forts, which it regarded as of little use. In 1747/8, however, the African Committee of the Society conceded that James Fort and Cape Coast Castle were of some value. It recommended that if the Royal African Company was to be replaced by some other body then the admission fee for new members should not exceed 40 shillings.

Finally, in 1750,<sup>1</sup> after some eighty years of squabbling, the regulated Company of Merchants trading to Africa replaced the old joint stock Royal African Company. All African traders of the realm were now required to become members of the new body and thus, while London lost her old predominance, the outports were compelled to forego their dream of a completely free and unregulated traffic.

The new Company, which was expressly forbidden to trade in a corporate capacity, was to be governed by a committee of nine, annually elected by its freemen in the three principal slave ports of London, Bristol and Liverpool. Admission was to be obtained on the payment of 40 shillings, the amount previously recommended by the merchants of Bristol, and the new Company inherited the function of maintaining the forts. In 1753, 157 of its freemen belonged to Bristol, and two years later their number had increased to 237 as against London's 147 and Liverpool's 89. Here it might be pointed out that this predominance of Bristol was more apparent than real since in both Liverpool and London firms were larger. Bristol, however, still continued to complain. The old Company was only dead in name, its traders declared; wicked London rigged elections to the committee in order to maintain its control. As the nine committee men were chosen from twelve principal merchants, the committee was virtually a permanent body, but this argument is far from convincing. Again, the Bristolians protested, the Company's officials on the coast assisted London only and hindered the traders of the outports, and so on and so on, for the Bristolians of the eighteenth century were redoubtable expostulators.

Edmund Burke, when a Member for the city, often heard of the alleged iniquities of the metropolitan traders from his constituents and of the advantages of a free and unregulated commerce—but he was not convinced. The Act upon which the African trade stood, he declared, was made by the most experienced men, upon the most mature deliberation:

*“It is not every man who is loud in complaint of grievance, that is equally zealous for redressing it; and nothing is more usual than*

I. 23 Geo. II, c 31.

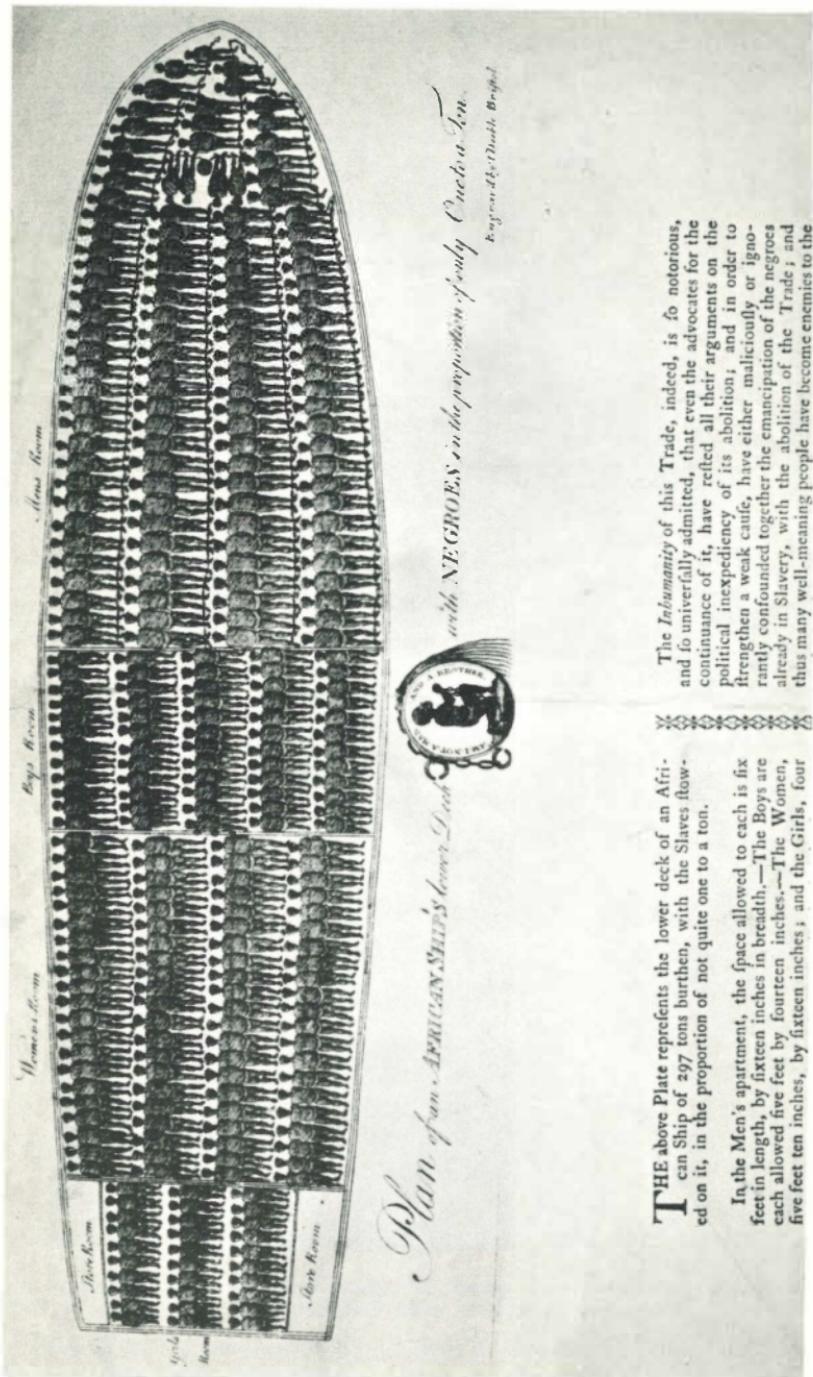
*for men to decry an establishment on account of some lesser Evils, in order to introduce Systems productive of much greater.”<sup>1</sup>*

Loud in her wailing, Bristol nevertheless grew rich on the slave trade which she relinquished when other more profitable and safer fields of investment appeared. Well into the eighteenth century Bristol was the only outport that was largely concerned in the African trade. Thus, in 1707-8 52 of her ships cleared for Guinea, only two of which belonged to the Company. According to the Liverpool historian, Gomer Williams, Bristol between 1701 and 1709 sent out an average of 57 ships to the African coast each year. But as he was trying to demonstrate the dramatic rise of Liverpool this figure is probably unduly high. In 1725, Bristol ships carried 16,950 slaves, and London 26,400, to the New World. In 1753 the clearings from the African coast were London 13, Bristol 27, Liverpool 64, Lancaster 7, Chester 1, Plymouth 1, Glasgow 4. Eighteen years later, of the 192 ships that cleared from Guinea and carried 47,146 slaves to the plantations, 107 ships with 29,250 negroes aboard were from Liverpool, 58 from London with 8,136, 23 from Bristol with 8,810, 4 from Lancaster with 950. Between 1756 and 1786 Bristol sent 588 ships to Africa, Liverpool 1,858. It is therefore probable that Bristol was never the principal slave port of the kingdom. In 1787 London had 26 ships, Bristol 22 and Liverpool 73 engaged in this trade. They carried a total of 36,000 slaves from Africa, averaging 494 a ship. In the ten years 1795-1804 London sent out 155 ships to Africa and carried 46,405 slaves. Bristol's 29 ships sailed from the coast with 10,718 negroes, while Liverpool's 1,099 vessels carried 332,800.

By the nineties, in fact, Bristol was already preening herself on her abhorrence of this trade, though she still made full use of the negroes with which the wicked merchants of Liverpool supplied her plantation owners. The author of *The New History* for 1793-4 wrote:

*“The Ardor for the Trade to Africa for men and women, our fellow creatures and equals, is much abated among the humane and benevolent Merchants of Bristol. In 1787 there were but 30 ships employed in this melancholy traffic; while the people of Liverpool in their indiscriminate rage for Commerce and for getting money at all events have nearly engrossed this Trade, incredibly exceeded London and Bristol in it, employ many thousands of tons of shipping for the purposes of buying and enslaving God’s rational creatures, and are the venders (horresco referens) of the souls and*

1. Donnan, E., *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America*, Vol. II, p. 552.



"Am I not a man and a brother?" Broadside attacking abuses in the slave trade, engraved for the Plymouth Committee by T. Dibble, Bristol.

Photographed by A. R. Griffin.

The *Inhumanity* of this Trade, indeed, is so notorious, and so universally admitted, that even the advocates for the continuance of it, have relented all their arguments on the political inexpediency of its abolition; and in order to strengthen a weak cause, have either maliciously or ignorantly confounded together the emancipation of the negroes already in Slavery, with the abolition of the Trade; and thus many well-meaning people have become enemies to the

THE above Plate represents the lower deck of an African Ship of 207 tons burthen, with the Slaves stowed on it, in the proportion of not quite one to a ton. In the Men's apartment, the space allowed to each is six feet in length, by fifteen inches in breadth.—The Boys are each allowed five feet by fourteen inches.—The Women, five feet ten inches, by sixteen inches; and the Girls, four

Bristol City Library

Estimated value of a cargo to be  
urchased at Bristol relating to American West Indian & Slave Trade.

Estimate for a cargo which to be Purchased 250 Negroes	
	at 1 Penny
250 paper bawlers at 1/-	£ 68.35.0 -
90 Blue Cloths of the best quality Same in 1/2 yards Spots	101. - - -
50 Blue Broad cloths	50. - - -
50 Semi Long cloths	60. - - -
100 Large American fine small cloths	80. - - -
100 Small dots	60. - - -
100 Cotton Homely w. red & blue stripes	60. - - -
30 White blue & white cloths	20. - - - 502.15.0
300 Musquito night cloths	3.190. -
100 Dint blachs	3.190. -
40 pair common large pistols	28. - - -
15 Broad cloths 15 inches	50. - - - 248. -
2 tons Lead in small bars abt 1 each	32. - - -
50 Kepurines 22 in 14 Cotton	10. - - -
150 Iron slaw	56.5. - - -
14 Tons Iron	230. - - -
1000 Copper rods	50. - - -
80 leather bottles barley	40. - - -
50 Chastal pipe beads	28. - - -
	£ 1226.0.0

Cloth, guns, beads and other goods purchased by a Bristol merchant in preparation for a slave voyage.

Bristol City Library: Jefferies MSS. XIII, p. 9. Photographed by A. R. Griffin.

*bodies of men and women! to almost all the West Indian Islands !! !”<sup>1</sup>*

According to Gomer Williams, the triumph of Liverpool was due to the greater energy and the superior business methods of the northern merchants who specialised in this trade. They trained their men better, paid lower wages, allowed more generous expenses and costs to their captains and factors than Bristol.

Before a man was trusted by a Liverpool firm with its business, either in Africa or in the colonies, he had to go through a long and rigorous training. As, however, in the nineties, the officers and sailors of Bristol were demanding higher wages, larger primeage and other allowances in order to put them on a footing of equality with their fellows in London and Liverpool, Gomer Williams's explanation appears to do greater credit to his local patriotism than to his reputation as an impartial historian. It was probably true, however, that in the second half of the eighteenth century Liverpool did derive some advantage from specialisation in the slave business. Moreover, she had at her door a rapidly growing textile industry that provided her with abundant supplies of the cheap cloth she needed for the African market. Meanwhile, Bristol, during this same period, was tending more and more to specialise in the sugar industry. Numbers of her merchants had plantations in the colonies, and although this business did not offer the same glittering prizes as the slave trade it paid well, as the career of John Pinney showed, and it was free from the perils which beset the African trade.

It is still said in Bristol that slaves were bought and sold on a large scale in this port, but there is no historical justification for this opinion. Some enthusiasts will go so far as to refer to a bill of sale which at one time was hung on the wall of a famous Bristol hostelry. An examination, however, proved that this document was a bill of sale of slaves in Kingston, Jamaica, not Bristol. The champions of this legend will point out certain caves near the city which they declare were used for the reception of slaves, but again there is no evidence to support this view. In Henbury churchyard there is to be found the grave of an African slave, whose epitaph is as follows:

Here  
Lieth the Body of  
**SCIPIO AFRICANUS**  
Negro Servant to ye Right

1. Mathews, W., *The New History, survey and description of the city and suburbs of Bristol, or Complete Guide and Bristol Directory for the Year 1793-4*, pp. 38-9.

Honourable Charles William  
Earl of Suffolk and Bradon  
Who died Ye 21 December  
1720 Aged 18 years.

I who was Born a PAGAN and a SLAVE  
Now sweetly sleep a CHRISTIAN in my Grave.  
What tho' my hue was dark my SAVIOUR'S Sight  
Shall change this darkness into radiant Light.  
Such grace to me my Lord on earth has given  
To recommend me to my Lord in heaven,  
Whose glorious second coming here I wait  
With Saints and Angels Him to celebrate.

Therefore, it is argued, slaves must have been sold in Bristol. The fact is that in the eighteenth century it was quite common for people of fashion to have African page boys dressed in pseudo-Roman costume and given such high-sounding names as the one in Henbury, or Numa Pompilius, Augustus Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, and so on. These servants, however, were never very numerous and after Lord Mansfield's famous judgment, in the case of the negro Sommersett (1772), slave-holding in England was definitely against the law.

The contention that slaves were brought to Bristol on a large scale, moreover, does less than justice to the business sense of her merchants in the eighteenth century. They were engaged in supplying the plantations with slaves and therefore the quicker they transported them from Africa to the colonial market the better. They would certainly never have been so stupid as to bring these poor dejected creatures up to Bristol, where they would probably have died of pneumonia, or influenza or some other disease, when they wanted to sell them in Jamaica, the Carolinas or Virginia.

Now, how was the slave trade organised? In spite of the prohibitions of the later Stuarts and the fact that such men as Edward Colston became members of the Royal African Company, it appears that a number of Bristol firms were illegally concerned with the African trade before the close of the seventeenth century, but for obvious reasons the number of these is unknown. Here it must be acknowledged that no irrefutable proof of this can be adduced, but, in view of the frequently declared interest of Bristol merchants in this traffic during the second half of the seventeenth century, this would appear to be a fairly reasonable conjecture.

Within a few years after it was thrown open Bristol's share of the slave trade was considerable and it is hard to believe that this started from zero in 1698.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the eighteenth century mayors of Bristol, sheriffs, aldermen, town councillors, Members of Parliament, the Society of Merchant Venturers and, indeed, men of the highest repute in the place were engaged in this traffic. These were not wicked men but pillars of society in their own time and there seems to be little justification for that macabre self-satisfaction which some Bristolians appear to derive from the recollection of the presumed moral depravity of their forbears. If these men are to be judged then it should be by the moral standards of the time in which they lived. Since the nation as a whole at that time condoned their activities and applauded them for their enterprise, there would appear to be no special reason why they should be selected for particular condemnation. Many of them honestly believed that though negroes looked like men they were not really human. Furthermore, condemnation of these merchants of a bygone age comes strangely from a generation that is more familiar with violence, cruelty and massacre on the grand scale than any since the Dark Ages. Wrong they undoubtedly were and their trade was one of the most barbarous and cruel that has disgraced the human story, but "man's inhumanity to man" still "makes countless thousands mourn!" Who are the inventors of poison gas, the hydrogen bomb and other devilries to judge?

Some of the slave firms of Bristol were small one-man concerns, but more often they were partnerships of two to six or more. A small firm might have one ship only which it occasionally dispatched to the African coast, but by the middle of the eighteenth century the larger ones often had several vessels and carried on a well organised trade with Africa and the plantations. As the century advanced this business in Liverpool tended to pass into the hands of a diminishing number of concerns whose size increased as smaller competitors were absorbed or eliminated. In Bristol the moderate-sized firm continued to hold its own to the end. Indeed, the concentration of the trade in the hands of a few large undertakings which took place in Liverpool, with consequent economies in overheads, may be an additional reason for her victory.

The larger firms had their agents on the coast and in the colonies, and their correspondence with their principals in England is one of our main sources of information on this subject. Frequently the

1. The Royal African Company from time to time licensed non-members to trade. In 1690, it approved of proposals for a ship fitting out in Bristol. See K. G. Davies, *The Royal African Company*, 1957, p. 126.

captain was required not only to sail his ship but to discharge the function of factor as well.

The vessels employed were of various rigs. Ships, brigs, brigantines, snows, galleys and schooners all appear in the records. Perhaps it should be explained that these eighteenth century galleys were not vessels rowed by slaves. The English galley of that period was built for speed, its spread of canvas was twice that of other sailing ships and it had a flush deck fore and aft.

One of the most surprising things about the vessels used in the African trade was their diminutive size. The *Laughing Sally*, for example, was so small that when she ran into a whale she sank, but what happened to the whale we do not know. Of the 70 vessels registered in Bristol between 1727 and 1769, engaged in carrying slaves from Africa to Virginia, one was of 50 tons burden and its usual cargo of slaves was 190. Thirteen ranged from 51 to 71 tons, with an average carrying capacity of 166. The *Bridget*, however, of 70 tons, carried 225 on at least one voyage. Thirty-eight were in the group 76 to 100 tons and their average cargo capacity was 233, but the *Williamsburg*, of 100 tons, contrived to take 335 aboard. The *Tryal*, of 90 tons, took 356 on one voyage and 390 on another. The *Ann*, of 90 tons, carried 310, and the *Bryce*, of 100 tons, took 249 on one voyage and 414 on another. In the group 101 to 150 tons there were 20 vessels with an average carrying capacity of 250, but the *Greyhound* of 120 tons burden carried 410 on at least one occasion. In the group 151 to 200 tons there were six vessels whose average slave cargo was 299, but the *Hector* of 200 tons carried 512 on a single voyage. There was one ship of 230 tons which, however, carried only a few slaves and was not really a slave ship. Of these 70 vessels 28 were built in Bristol, seven in other parts of England, 25 in the colonies and 10 were prizes. At the time of their departure from Bristol on the voyages to which these figures apply, their average age was 10 years, but the *Marlborough* was 29 and several others were 20 years old. From this it would seem that it was the practice to divert ships to the slave trade when their best days were over.

So much for the ships, and now what of the men who sailed in them? The slave trade was never popular among sailors, but this repugnance was due not so much to humanitarian scruples as to the evil reputation of the Coast, for as sailors sang:

Beware and take care of the Bight of Benin,  
There's one comes out for forty go in,

In peace time the wages paid in the West Indian and Guinea trades were about the same, but in time of war the level in the latter was somewhat higher. Recruitment was often far from easy, and after

the anti-slave trade campaign began it became increasingly difficult. So various forcible methods were employed to collect a crew. Men were carried aboard dead drunk or with the connivance of the taverner they were confronted with the unpleasant choice between imprisonment for debt or a voyage on a slaver. Death and desertion were all too common. Thus, out of 940 men who made up the crews of 24 Bristol ships in 1787, 216 died during the voyage and 239 deserted or were discharged in the colonies. Only 10 out of 56 who sailed in the *Brothers* from Bristol returned home; 19 out of 51 in the *Alexander* and 14 out of 44 in the *Royal Charlotte*. But as these figures were used for purposes of propaganda by the anti-slave trade campaigners it is probable that the losses on an average voyage were not as high as these.

Normally a Guineaman carried a somewhat larger crew than was customary in other trades. In Bristol ships it was the usual practice to carry 12 men for every 100 tons in vessels of 300 tons and over. In the direct trade with the West Indies, however, the number was seven. Generally speaking, it was usual in smaller vessels to carry a larger proportion of men to tons. Again, in slavers only two-fifths of the crew were able-seamen, as against four-fifths in the direct West Indian trade. Slave ships were often barricaded on poop and forecastle. The guns that peeped through in convenient places to cover the waist of the vessel where the negroes came up for exercise and air were grim reminders of the perils of this trade.

What, then, did these vessels carry with them to Africa? Usually a variety of chintzes and other sorts of cloth, muskets, pistols, powder, shot, beads, metal bars, trinkets of different kinds, spirits, a medicine chest, slave provisions, cooking utensils and a grim assortment of handcuffs, chains, shackles, irons and whips. They usually sailed for Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast, Anamabo, Whydah, New Calabar, Bonny and Old Calabar, but the term "the Guinea coast" was commonly understood to include the whole of the African littoral between Cape Verde and the Congo. Indeed, ships sometimes traded along the coast as far down as Angola and occasionally a few sailed round the Cape to Madagascar.

With luck a firm might make three profits on a single voyage. Thus, the cargoes taken out from Bristol were exchanged on the coast for negroes at a profit. One captain sold cloth at a crown a piece which had cost him eighteen pence in Bristol. The slaves were disposed of in the colonies at a profit, and the colonial products for which they were exchanged were sold in England at a profit. But it was always a dangerous trade and a voyage might prove to be a dead loss. England was frequently at war in the eighteenth cen-

tury, so enemy ships were to be looked for, and Bristol suffered grievously at the hands of French privateers. Then, in times of peace and war, as Bristol captains knew to their cost, both in the Old World and the New, there were corsairs and pirates with which to reckon. The *Callabar Merchant* of Bristol, for example, in 1719 was attacked and captured by three ships, one of which sailed under the black flag.

Life on the African coast was wont to be dangerous. Portuguese, French, Dutch, Danes, Germans, Swedes, Britons and New Englanders competed for slaves. They traded and caroused; they cheated, fought and died; they broke every law of God and Man, but some of them managed somehow to survive. Even the officers of his Majesty's ships sent out to protect the honest trader (assuming that any existed) took a hand in illicit trade and neglected their duty.

A ship might be supplied with negroes in various ways. Company vessels, or those that acknowledged its authority, resorted to its forts where they found negroes already collected and ready to be put aboard. Again, the victims might be purchased in a slave market controlled by a local chief or white trader. When the negroes were bought and branded they were driven aboard, and the sooner the ship was fully "slaved" the better. Sometimes a firm would send its agent on in advance to procure negroes in order that the delay on the coast should be as short as possible.

"*We hope that this will find you safe arrived on the Coast of Angola & with a fine parcell of Negroes ready to putt on board our ship Union by whom (God willing) you'll receive this.*"<sup>1</sup>

This agent was then ordered to proceed with the greatest expedition and care and so to justify the good opinion that his employers had of him. He was to buy about 100 slaves, "aiming chiefly at the females from 10 to 14 years of age".

When the supply on the coast fell short, boats were dispatched up river to trade. Villages were attacked at the dead of night and all the young and fit that could be captured were carried off. Sometimes, like birds of prey, the slavers waited for the conclusion of a war, which in some instances they themselves had fomented, in order that they might enslave the conquered and, if there were not enough of these, the conquerors as well.

A ship might be on the coast for a few weeks only or, like the *Black Prince* of Bristol in the early sixties of the eighteenth century, many months might elapse before she sailed from the coast.

"*When we purchase Negroes.*" writes Snelgrave in the early eighteenth century,

1. *African Slave Trade of Bristol* (Bristol City Library: Jefferies MSS. XIII).

"we couple the sturdy Men together with Irons; but we suffer the Women and Children to go freely about: And soon after we have sail'd from the Coast, we undo all the Mens Irons".<sup>1</sup>

According to another author, it was the practice  
". . . to keep the Males apart from the Women and Children, to handcuff the former; Bristol Ships triple such as are sturdy, with Chains round their Necks;"

They kept "their own Men sober, and on a barricado'd Quarter-deck:"<sup>2</sup>

Though some captains tried to mitigate the lot of their victims as much as they were able, brutality was the rule, for captains and crews alike were never wholly free from fear. Some commanders, like the famous Captain Crow of Liverpool, were naturally kindly men, but many were brutes. There was one, for example, who was brought to trial in England because he had ordered a sick child to be thrown overboard after its mother died and no one would take care of it. He was acquitted. When an opportunity offered, grief-maddened wretches leapt overboard to escape their misery. Sometimes, as in the *King David* of Bristol, the Africans mutinied and murdered their tormentors, though in this instance the rising was made possible by the indulgence with which the captain had treated the slaves. Again, a ship arrived in New England on one occasion with a passenger aboard who was the sole survivor of the ship's company of a Bristol schooner. In addition to mutiny there was always the possibility of epidemic. Thus, in the records are to be found statements of losses which ranged from 60 to 100 and more in a single voyage.

Even when a ship arrived in a colonial port the troubles of the captain were not over. Colonial governments had the unpleasant habit of imposing special duties on the importation of negroes. As repeated petitions to Parliament prove, Virginia was a frequent offender, but South Carolina, New York, Jamaica, Barbados and other colonies were also guilty. These special impositions led not only to legal wrangling but also to the smuggling of cargoes of slaves ashore in out of the way places. Then, when there was no difficulty of this sort to worry the captain, he might find on his arrival that the local market was over-stocked or that the price of slaves had slumped because of the threat of war. For these and many other reasons the planters might be disinclined to buy, for to them slaves were just one commodity like any other.

"The John and Betty arrived here the 4th Instant, with one hundred and fifty eight negroes, she purchas'd two hundred and fifty and

1. Donnan, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 353.

2. *Ibid.* p. 281.

have buried eleven or more since her arrivall. They are the worst Cargoe of Negroes have been imported for severall Years past . . . . They were so badd Could not sell Tenn to the planters. We yesterday sold one hundred and five . . . at eighteen pounds Ten shillings per head, Which Considering the Condition the Negroes were in, is the greatest price have been given. The remainder are so very bad, cannot gett £8 pr head for them. Wee shall be oblig'd to sell them at Outcry for the most they will Yield."<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of another cargo a writer informed his principals in England:

"A Brigantine arrived last Friday called the Post Boy of Bristol with 350 Negroes. These are proper for the Havanas and Cuba. As we want Girls we shall take those who are not too much on the Yellow cast."<sup>2</sup>

An agent in Antigua wrote:

"We would you could be perswaded to Direct your Vessells to the Gold Coast or Widdaw, as negroes from those places Especially the Latter, are in most Esteem here . . . when Bonny Negroes (the men particularly) are held in much Contempt Comparatively . . . many of them hanging and Drowning themselves."<sup>3</sup>

Writing from Kingston, Jamaica, in 1729 another agent states:

"The people of Bristoll seem doubtfull of the Jamaica Market for Slaves, I think the worst Cargo since Ive been here is the Aurora, & they turn out at abt. £19-10/- round, & is the best Sale I've been concerned in they were in generall either Children or Greyheaded . . . "<sup>4</sup>

Again:

"a third poor pining creature hanged herself with a piece of small Vine which shews that her carcass was not very weighty."<sup>5</sup>

There is much said in the factors' letters about the advantages and disadvantages of cash payments, short and long credits, brokerage charges, market conditions, but nothing about the feelings of the unfortunate negroes who were thought of merely as horses, cattle and sheep.

"Since my Arrl," John Pinney wrote from Nevis in 1765, "I've purchd 9 Negroe Slaves at St Kits and can assure you I was shock'd at the first appeace of humn flesh expos'd for Sale. But surely God ordain'd 'em for ye use and benefit of us: otherse his Divine Will, would have been made manifest by some partir sign or token."<sup>6</sup>

1. *African Slave Trade of Bristol* (Bristol City Library: Jefferies MSS. XIII).

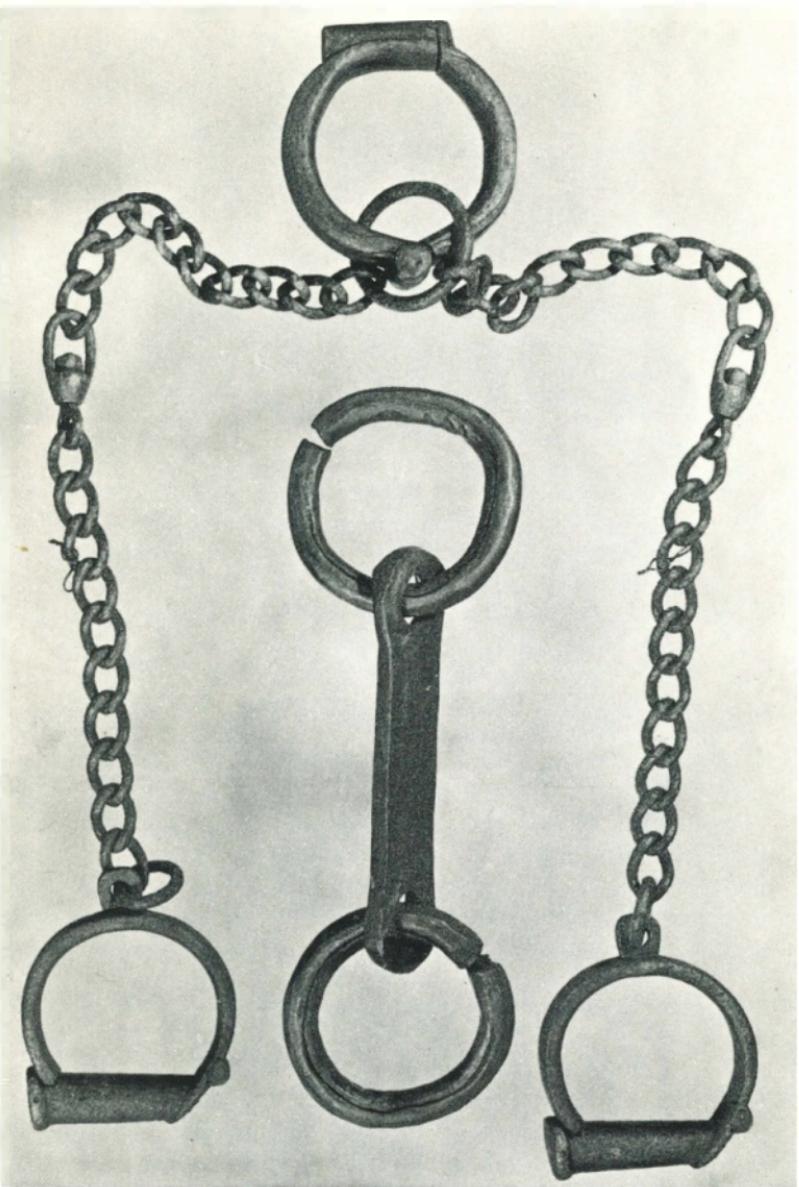
2. Donnan, *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 459.

3. *African Slave Trade of Bristol* (Bristol City Library: Jefferies MSS. XIII).

4. *Ibid.*

5. Donnan, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, p. 432, n.2.

6. *Pinney Papers, Business Letter-book, 1761-75*, fol. 67.



Shackles used on a slave ship.

Photograph by courtesy of the Director of Bristol City Museum.

Transactions on Board the Black Prince Between a Night. Cœurs

ed Voyage in the Ship Black Prince From Bristol to the Gold Coast of Africa Being  
bore 7<sup>th</sup> to the Coast commencing April 24<sup>th</sup> 1762,

Bristol City Library.

Sometimes all the slaves were sold quickly at the first port of call, singly or in parcels. Sometimes they were peddled round the colonies for months from Barbados to Virginia. Or, again, "soul drivers", as middle men were often called, in some colonies herded them from plantation to plantation like cattle, selling a few here and a few there and paying no attention whatever to family ties.

The scramble was another form of sale adopted by captains in a hurry to get rid of indifferent cargo:

"... the ship was darkened with sails, and covered round. The men slaves were placed on the main deck, and the women on the quarter deck. The purchasers on shore were informed a gun would be fired when they were ready to open the sale. A great number of people came on board with tallies or cards in their hands, with their own names upon them, and rushed through the barricado door with the ferocity of brutes. Some had three or four handkerchiefs tied together, to encircle as many as they thought fit for their purpose."<sup>1</sup>

Again, the factors might dispose of their wares at the slave market. Pinkard describes a typical one:

"... the slaves were brought in, one at a time, and mounted upon the chair before the bidders, who handled and inspected them with as little concern as if they had been examining cattle at Smithfield market. They turned them about, felt them, viewed their shape and their limbs, looked into their mouths, made them jump and throw out their arms, and subjected them to all the means of trial as if dealing with a horse or any other brute animal."<sup>2</sup>

As to the question what did the slaves cost, no one answer can be given. It has been seen that the goods brought out from England were sold at high rates. The price of a slave in Africa depended upon a lot of imponderables—scarcity, abundance, place of origin, age, sex, physical condition, the bargaining power of the captain and many other things. The most common unit of exchange on the coast was a bar of iron, but the value of this was far from uniform :

"A Barr is a denomination given to a certain Quantity of Goods of any Kind, which Quantity was of equal Value among the Natives to a Barr of Iron, when this River was first traded to. Thus, a Pound of Fringe is a Barr, two Pounds of Gunpowder is a Barr, an ounce of Silver is but a Barr, and 100 Gun-Flints is a Barr. . ."<sup>3</sup> and, in fact, each commodity could be valued in terms of bars. All

1. *An Abstract of the Evidence delivered before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in the years 1790 and 1791; on the part of the petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.* p. 46.

2. Pinkard, G., *Notes on the West Indies*, vol. 1, p. 430.

3. Donnan, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 396.

that is attempted here is to give a rough idea of the cost of raw negroes in the eighteenth century. At Anamabo in the early 1700s they fetched the equivalent of £11 to £14 and, at the same place, in 1714-15 prices ranged between £20 and £26, but from £16 to £22 on the Leeward coast. By 1719 prices fluctuated between £28 and £32, while in 1757 (that is, during the Seven Years War), at Bonny, negroes could be purchased at from £9 to £10 a piece. Between 1783 and 1787 prices ranged between £10 and £20. There therefore does not appear to have been any marked rise in the price of slaves, though violent fluctuations undoubtedly occurred.

It is equally difficult to say what they sold for in the colonies. Taking the whole period 1660-1807, however, there appears to have been an upward trend. Here again, place of origin, condition, state of the market, the political situation and so on directly affected the movement of prices, but, bearing all these things in mind, the Royal African Company in 1663 sold slaves in Barbados at £18 a piece. In 1700 the price in the same colony was £19. 15. 4d. They fetched £18 to £24 in Jamaica nine years later and from £28 to £30 in Barbados. Writing from the latter colony on January 3rd, 1723 an agent states:

*"The 10th ulto we sold the ship Normans cargo of Bete Negroes (tho' they were in bad order by a tedious Passage) at 22.6.11 round, the same day was a Sla of Gold Coast wch came out at £29. 19/6 and not extraordinary. Most Plantations want a supply wch hope will keep up the Price for a considerable time."<sup>1</sup>*

In a letter from Jamaica in 1728 the writer says:

*"... am to acquaint you of ye arrival of ye Virgin from ye Gold Coast with 262 Slaves to our address the Sale of which wee've finished & they comes at £30: 17: 6 pr head round, wch is good price Considering there was so many small among them it has been our Ill luck to have too many of them in this Ship so well as ye Tunbridge for I begg leave to assure you that its impossible for us to bring out boys & Girls at soe great price as men & women . . ."<sup>2</sup>*  
In 1739 a freshly-landed man slave cost £24 sterling and £37 during the forties. Anamabo negroes, which cost £9 or £10 on the Coast, sold for £29 or £30 in the colonies. In 1776 male slaves in Jamaica cost £50 and in 1791 about the same. Between 1795 and 1797 a male slave cost from £50 to £80 and women and children proportionately less. Creoles, that is, slaves born in the islands, if trained as cooks or mechanics were valued at £20, £30 or even £60 more than untrained new arrivals.

1. *African Slave Trade of Bristol* (Bristol City Library : Jefferies MSS. XIII).

2. *Ibid.*

This, then was the brutal trade against which the conscience of England revolted in the closing years of the eighteenth century and which Wilberforce made it his life's work to destroy. Contrary to the views of the Marxists, the slave trade in its last years was thriving. The West Indian colonies were still of enormous value to this country and it is false to maintain that Great Britain gave up this commerce only when it ceased to be of any economic significance. It has been computed that at the end of the eighteenth century four-fifths of all Britain's investments overseas were in the West Indies.

*"The first place I resolved to visit," writes Clarkson, "was Bristol . . . On turning a corner within about a mile of that city, at about eight in the evening, I came within sight of it. The weather was rather hazy, which occasioned it to look of unusual dimensions. The bells of some of the churches were then ringing; the sound of them did not strike me, till I had turned the corner before mentioned, when it came upon me at once. It filled me, almost directly, with a melancholy for which I could not account. I began now to tremble, for the first time, at the arduous task I had undertaken, of attempting to subvert one of the branches of the commerce of the great place which was then before me."*<sup>1</sup>

Clarkson expected much trouble and persecution in Bristol and he mournfully speculated on the possibility of his ever leaving it alive. But it is hard not to feel that this worthy clergyman was given somewhat unnecessarily to self-dramatization. He thought of himself, on his entry into Bristol, as a gallant knight errant waging battle for a noble ideal, as in fact he was. He was not St George, however, and Bristol was not a dragon, but a great, solid English trading town. His apprehensions of bad treatment in that city did less than justice to its citizens. It was, of course, natural that slave merchants and plantation owners should not receive him with open arms and he was bitterly attacked in the local press and on the platform. Still, it should not be forgotten that the Society of Merchant Venturers allowed him full liberty to visit its Hall and to abstract such information as he required from its records, and this although his purpose was well known. In fact, he found many people in Bristol ready and anxious to aid him in his task. By that time of course only a few people were actively engaged in the slave trade; yet, though some Bristolians denounced it, there were few at first who believed that it could be abolished.

The lurid descriptions of drunkenness and vice which Clarkson gives of the taverns in which slave crews were picked up are not

1. Clarkson, T., *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, Vol. I, p. 293-4.

the concern of the present writer. Doubtless Clarkson did encounter dreadful conditions in the taverns which he visited, but this sensitive and imaginative young clergyman, who must have had little previous experience of a pub crawl in a sea port town, can scarcely be accepted as an unbiased witness.

After over twenty years of gallant and unremitting toil the slave trade was at last abolished. Thereafter, Great Britain took upon herself the task of seeing that it was abolished throughout the world. This desirable goal, however, was not reached for many years, but the story of this prolonged crusade lies outside the scope of the present pamphlet.

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